BASIC ISSUES IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Since this project began in the summer of 1990, I have been thinking about and struggling with and finally agonizing over a series of questions which, until this exercise, I had never asked before.

I. What skills does one need in order to be an effective clergyperson? What does one need to know?

II. How does one learn the skills and procure the knowledge? Where is it learned and procured? Who teaches?

One would think that the answers to those questions are fairly simple. And if not simple, at least obvious, particularly for one who has been doing the job for 30 years. The truth is that the more I thought the less certain I was that I knew the answers.

This paper will attempt to explore those basic questions on the basis of my own life experience. While it is risky to do that, i.e. to describe a world on the basis of what one can see from one's own front porch, I have concluded that to do something like that is the best way I can serve the overall Basic Issues in Theological Education project.

I. What skills does one need to have, and what does one need to know, in order to be an effective clergyperson?

First, a clarification. We are all ministers. We are called, one and all, to the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. Historically, we have made a lot of trouble for ourselves when we have forgotten that the call to ministry is the call to discipleship, that it comes to all, that we are all members of the priesthood, and that professional leadership in the church is not the product of a "higher" or "better" calling.

And yet there are leaders and some lead more effectively than others, and it is important not to lose sight of that reality in the interests of ecclesiastical/political correctness. I am happy to leave the question of whether God chooses particular men and women to specific types of ministry to the theologians, or to those who are our ecclesiastical gatekeepers, deciding who gets ordained and who does not. The facts remain, there are clergy who are effective leaders and clergy who are not.

How does it happen?

A. Formation

My first response is new for me. Incredibly to me now, I had never encountered the idea of formation before the reading associated with the Basic Issues in Theological Education project. I'm embarrassed! Where was I? How could I have missed it? In a sense I have spent most of my Basic Issues in Theological Education energy for 24 months thinking about formation and exploring where and how it happened.

I encountered two assumptions about formation, or spiritual formation, neither of which seemed, at first, to be true for me.

The first assumption is that formation happens in a congregation. Beginning with baptism, proceeding through experiences of Christian Education and confirmation, individual faith is nurtured, spiritual formation happens, within that extraordinary complex of relationships which constitute the life of a particular congregation.

My initial conclusion was that it didn't happen for me that way. We were steady but indifferent Presbyterians. Compared to the intensity and zealotry of Baptist neighbors who attended church twice on Sunday, Wednesday evening, for a staggering number of revivals, traveling evangelists and Bible studies, our Presbyterian attachment seemed virtually negligible. Those people next door were "formed"!

And then, this past summer, I was invited to return to my home church to speak in worship on the occasion of the congregation's one-hundredth anniversary. It was a provocative experience for me. Of course I was "formed" there.

James Fowler, puts it this way:

In a covenant community, a community of faith, a congregation, formation happens, "a formation of affections...a person's deep and guiding emotions, the well-spring of a motivation in a person - in accordance with the community's identification with its central passion."[1]

So, yes, I was formed in a community whose central passion was differently expressed from my neighbors' zealotry; formed

spiritually that is, with a particular posture toward the life of faith in the world. In that congregation I learned, by watching, that faithfulness was not contradictory to involvement in the world, that there was something a little worldly about this way of being religious, that being a Christian was not a matter of retreating from the world to the cloister of like-minded friends, but of figuring out how to live in the world with integrity and courage and faithfulness.

I should have known it all along. The Reformed tradition says formation will happen this way. One begins to learn about leadership and about discipleship in a congregation.

Parker Palmer provides an eloquent illustration:

> "I recall attending a Sunday School session in a small Black church in the rural South. Only four or five people were present, but the meeting functioned strictly according to Roberts Rules of Order. The class president presided, a secretary took notes, and a parliamentarian was available to resolve questions of proper process. The whole scene struck me as overdone. With so few people involved, would it not make sense to proceed in a more casual manner? When I raised the question with the pastor he informed me with some vigor that in such classes disenfranchised people had a rare, even singular opportunity to learn how to function in a political setting - how to get one's

> concerns on the agenda, how to argue one's case... He argued, and rightly so, that I had witnessed the formation of citizens, who were learning skills and gaining the confidence necessary to function effectively."[2]

And so it happens, in different ways: formation designed by congregations in response to the realities of the culture, the particular world in which they live.

The second assumption is that spiritual formation also occurs in the places of formal theological education which may or may not be related closely and intentionally to congregations.

The Dean of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Steve Hancock, argues that important spiritual formation happens in the midst of the process of theological education, whether it is intended or not.

Early Presbyterians understood it and wanted it that way. When the Presbyterian General Assembly authorized the founding of seminaries in 1810, the resolution contained the following:

> "Filling the church with a learned and able ministry without a corresponding portion of real piety would be a curse to the world, and an offense to God and the people, so the General Assembly think it their duty to state that, in establishing a seminary for training up ministers...it will be their endeavor to make it...a nursery of vital piety, as well

as of sound theological learning, and to train up persons who will be lovers as well as defenders of the truth as it is in Jesus."[3]

Hancock's research at four Presbyterian seminaries revealed that:

> "Most graduates remember seminary years as a time of significant spiritual growth, but most wish their seminary had been more intentional in helping them grow spiritually.
>
> "Most of the efforts seminaries have made to help students in the area of spiritual development have been outside the formal, required curriculum.
>
> "Spiritual growth and development of seminary students seems to come as an indirect result or 'by-product' of other activities...field education, service, social justice, new relationships with professors and other students."[4]

John Updike pokes fun at what he thinks happens at a University Divinity School:

> "Believing souls are trucked in like muddy, fragrant, cabbages from the rural hinterland and in three years of fine distinctions and exegetical quibbling we have chopped them into coleslaw saleable at any suburban supermarket. We take in saints and

send out ministers, workers in the vineyard of inevitable anxiety and discontent."[5]

It is not, of course, that simple. It is not "believing souls" who come to seminary so much as "seeking souls." But Updike does have the process right. Formation happens along side of learning. Students learn new information and become new people.

Toward a preliminary conclusion:

.Spiritual formation happens in the community of faith, i.e. a congregation.

.More, and significant, spiritual formation happens in the process of theological education, intended or not. In fact, it would seem that structures of theological education, e.g. a course in Spiritual Formation, are not as conducive to spiritual development as actual activity involving other people.

Therefore, it would seem that preparation for ministry should include life within a community of faith, not as an elective activity, but as the foundation, or the context, of the entire enterprise.

B. Management

It has been argued persuasively that the management model of clergy professionalism is essentially a sell-out to the world, a symptom of the church's lack of direction and sense of identity and mission, a modern variation on the theme of "Whoring after Babylon."

Perhaps. I'll risk arguing that whatever name we use to describe it and however we adorn it, management is a skill an effective clergyperson must have and which preparation for ministry must in some way cultivate.

My argument is essentially theological, incarnationally theological. "The Word became flesh and lived among us." "We are the body of Christ." We believe, as a matter of creed, in the "Holy Catholic Church." The Church is in the world. It may wish it were not in the world. It may act as if it were in some other world. It may exhaust its energy critiquing and hating the world. But insofar as it is the Body of Christ, the Church is as radically in the world as he was.

And those who would lead the Church, i.e. enable it to identify its mission, articulate its mission, assist it to accomplish its mission, must know something about leading, enabling, assisting groups, communities, organizations to do what they want to do.

Thus, management... part gift, part teachable and learnable skill. How does one learn it? By reading about it, listening to good managers talk about it, watching effective managers manage. And by doing it.

Bishop Fred Borsch has suggested that an effective clergy-person must know how to lead, should show some evidence of having led some organization, a club, a team, a class. I think he's right and I think, furthermore, that the teaching and learning of management, including leadership, is absolutely essential to effective professional ministry.

Theological education might begin simply, by not denigrating a management model of ministry so that graduate clergy all their lives believe that time engaged in administration is time away from real ministry, drudgery, a necessary evil. And then, theological education, insofar as it is preparation for ministry, might ask the people involved in graduate management education about the management of a congregation. Finally, preparation for ministry might include the disciplined necessity of practicing management and cultivating leadership skills by managing and leading.

Toward a Preliminary Conclusion:

.The Church is, among other things, an organization which lives in the world, has goals for itself and is willing to work for their realization.

.Clergypersons are, whether they wish to be or not, church managers.

Therefore, preparation for ministry, should include learning management theory and experiencing management practice.

C. Knowledge

The third dimension of preparation for effective ministry has to do with specialized and general knowledge. The curricular content of theological education traditionally has focused on theology, history, and Bible. To close the gap between the academy and parish various bridges have been built: Internship, borrowing from the traditional medical education model - academic discipline followed by a period of resident apprenticeship;

Field Work, practical experience concurrent with classroom study and, of course, a wide range of academic courses described as - "Practical Theology."

There may be major problems of relevance when the curriculum of theological education is confined to the centuries-old formula of theology, history and Bible, but even more critical problems when "Practical Theology" becomes a "how-to" conglomerate of wise tid-bits from the life and experience of a tired practitioner.

Edward Farley observes:

> "The very structure of theological studies alienates the whole enterprise from praxis. Hence proposals on behalf of praxis made to that structure are quickly and easily absorbed and trivialized. Practical theology never has existed and does not now exist. The closest it ever came was a gleam in Schleirmacher's eye."[6]

And Don S. Browning puts the matter in a helpful new context:

> "The process of practical thinking, whether it be religious or secular, is indeed complex. To think and act practically in fresh and innovative ways may be the most complex thing humans ever attempt. I wish it were otherwise. Life, especially modern life, would be so much simpler."(7)

Browning proposes an intriguing alternative to the classical format of theological education - theology, history, Bible, augmented by praxis... All theology is practical, that practical theology is not a "sub-speciality" but "theology as such." Professor Browning would upset the apple cart of theological education arguing that "practical thinking is the center of human thinking and theological and technical thinking are abstractions from practical thinking."[7]

Browning is, I believe, onto something important. "We never move from theory to practice, even when it seems we do. Theory is always embedded in practice."[8]

If he is even close to the truth there are enormous implications for how theological education and preparation for ministry actually happen. To assume that successful scholarship in theology, history and Bible is equivalent to preparation for ministry is naive. To assume that resolution is the addition of a course in Practical Theology or a field work requirement is no less naive.

Somehow theological education and preparation for ministry must occur in a place and time and context in which individuals are living the questions, dealing with the people, managing the institution.

~~Toward a preliminary~~ conclusion: And so - a conclusion?

.Knowledge of theology, history and Bible are requisite but alone do not prepare for ministry.

.Praxis is always, by the very nature of theological education, subject to trivialization.

.All theology is practical theology because that is the way human beings think.

Therefore, the Church is the primary place where preparation for ministry happens, or perhaps more consistently, the Church is the locus where theological education can become preparation for ministry.

II. How and where does one learn to skills and procure the knowledge?

How and where did I learn? Who taught me?

I wandered into the B.D. program at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago for two reasons:

- it was not a denominational seminary.
- a college advisor had suggested it as a place I might spend a year or two pursuing the kinds of theological questions I was asking at the time without anybody pressing me about professional ministry.

I found, to my satisfaction, that both reasons were actualized in experience. And, ironically, it was the Divinity School's neglect of Practical Theology which contributed in a major way to my learning how to be a minister.

By blessed accident, at the end of my first year at Divinity School, I ran out of patience with the endless pursuit of abstractions in the lecture hall. And I simultaneously ran out of money. The latter was no small crisis. I was married, and the father of a newborn daughter. A resolution to our fiscal crisis appeared in the form of a small Union Church, in a blue collar community in the Calumet region of Northern Indiana,

which had been subsisting for years by way of, or in spite of, the efforts of a string of student pastors from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and the Chicago Theological Seminary. It was a fateful decision. No one thought it was a good one. The school worried about the daily twenty-five mile commute. My parents were hoping I would come to my senses and go to law school. Sue and I saw it as a way to pay next month's bills, a real house with a real back yard and $50.00 per week!

I had only the vaguest notion of how to do what the trusting souls of that small congregation had agreed to pay me $50.00 a week, and the use of a real house with a real back yard, to do.

Whatever I know about being a minister, I started to learn it there. They didn't teach me, but they were the patient and graceful context in which I could and did learn. In fact, I now know that a creative dynamic was set off by my being there which suddenly and dramatically transformed the academic rigor of the University of Chicago into preparation for ministry. Browning is right! Abstract thinking follows practical thinking.

I continue to try to exegete that experience.

How did I learn to preach?

I never sat for a course on preaching. There was none available. I listened to preachers. I had been listening all my life but I listened with concentrated, white-knuckle intensity after I was living with the necessity of preaching weekly. I listened to preachers in chapel - Joseph Sittler and James Nichols and Marcus Barth - and I read everything I could find,

books of sermons and homiletics texts. I apprenticed myself to preachers without their ever knowing it. I learned to preach by the necessity of preaching and I am now convinced that the fact that the necessity occurred while I was still in the environment of theological/education was critical.

When Granger Westberg lectured about "grief work," I listened differently, I know, because I was still reeling emotionally from sitting at Johnny Johnson's bedside, holding his hand, as he died. He was not an abstraction, nor even a patient at the University Clinic upon whom Westberg's students called on in order to "write it up" for class. His widow and teenaged sons lived a block away from our house. They were in the pew the next Sunday after he died and they were going to hear what I said. The church was the context for theological education to become preparation for ministry.

A 60s social activist, committed to Civil Rights and the immersion of the Church in local political issues, I plunged into local politics with Kennedyesque determination and vigor, took public stands on particular issues. Whether the town should drill a new well or pipe in water from Lake Michigan was by far the "hottest" local issue. I was for lake water and in the process offended and infuriated my members who wondered what lake water had to do with the Gospel, and I wrote a letter to the editor of the town paper that was unkind and hurtful to a local politician. It was happening while I was reading, listening, arguing, in courses in Social Ethics.

Maybe ~~Someone suggested that~~ the twenty-five mile daily commute was the key to my learning, that I was living in two places

thoroughly and simultaneously. And I am prepared now to suggest that it may be a helpful paradigm for the future.

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AND SO, TO A PROPOSAL

I'm grateful for my experience at a university divinity school, for the academic study of religion, and for the rigorous, critical approach to theological inquiry as an expression of the human pursuit of truth.

But when theological education needs to become preparation for ministry, its locus should change, and the teaching responsibility should intentionally broaden.

I propose that preparation for ministry happen situationally, in places where praxis is daily necessity. + where the Brownson paradigm - practical preceedy obstacle can be sek fro to go to mus

I propose residential experience as absolutely necessary, not in a graduate dormitory or a university neighborhood, but in a parish, a neighborhood where church people and non-church people live, move and have being.

I propose **Teaching Parishes,** large urban congregations, clusters of inner-city ministries, and rural churches, to which students in preparation for ministry, would be assigned and in which they would live and minister.

I propose intentional mentoring, apprenticing of students in preparation for ministry with experienced practitioners in a context of reflection and critique.

I propose to acknowledge where and how spiritual formation happens, in the community of faith; and to encourage those who think about and plan for the theological education of the future

to force the issue of praxis by simply moving the location, or dividing the location between classroom and parish; to celebrate, that is, that theological common ground upon which we all stand - namely that "the Word become flesh and lived among us," not in classroom or cloister alone, but among us, in the world, in communities of faith, congregations, parishes, the Church.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Fowler, James W., Becoming Adult, Becoming Human, Harper, San Francisco, 1984, p. 115.

[2]Palmer, Parker, The Company of Strangers, Crossroads, New York, 1981, p. 83.

[3]Hancock, Steve C., The Pluralistic Vision, Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestant Education and Leadership, Edited by Coalter, Mulder and Weeks, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 1992, p. 72ff.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Updike, John, Roger's Version, A Novel, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1986, p. 114.

[6]Farley, Edward, Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm, Historical Perspectives, p. 30.

[7]Browning, Don S., A Fundamental Practical Theology, Introduction, Can Theology be Practical? p. 11.

[8]Ibid.